GOD OF THE LOST

The Third in an Advent Series of Sermons

December 11, 1988, 8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11
Luke 2:1-7

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ...make straight in the desert a highway..." -Isaiah 40:1,3 (RSV)

"Swing low, sweet charriot,
Comin' for to carry me home!

Swing low, sweet charriot,
Comin' for to carry me home!

If you get there before I do,
Jes' tell my fren's that I'm a comin' too,

Swing low, sweet charriot,
Comin' for to carry me home."

There is no more powerful human sentiment than that. There are no more poignant and important themes expressed in our music, our literature, our religion - than lostness, exile, homelessness.

"Swing low, sweet charriot,
Comin' for to carry me home."

It is my favorite accompaniment for rocking babies and it will always have that sweet association. But it was sung first by people who were a long way from home: the Africans who were hunted down like animals, crowded onto filthy ships, transported across the ocean, put on the block, and sold as slaves. Somehow, by the power of a grace which could overcome even the cruelty of the system of slavery, they became Christians and from their religious experience emerged a magnificent expression of the Gospel of Jesus Christ which reflected some of the deepest and most profound meanings of faith. They heard the theology of freedom and hope better than anyone. They knew God as a comfort and strength to those in captivity - the weak, the outsiders. They knew that God knew where they were, even if no one else did. They knew that God didn't want them to be where they were. So they sang - "Swing low, sweet charriot."

And the home to which the "sweet charriot" would carry them?... I expect they couldn't help recalling images and memories of the home from which they were taken: the villages, the people, the sweet, daily round of ordinariness, the mundane activities which became precious in memory. And I expect there was an "eschatological" dimension: home was heaven, a place of glad reunion. But I also expect that home meant something real, tangible and possible in the here and now: freedom, for instance, a new life, a place and state of well-being, safety, security, wholeness and peace.

There are songs about home in every culture. Blacks in South Africa, are exiles in their own land, sing them. So do the Palestinian people. Irish Americans who have never been out of the country become misty eyed singing the songs of home.

> "You take the high road
> And I'll take the low road
> And I'll be in Scotland afor-ye..."

It was sung by the Highlanders in English prisons, after the last great uprising in 1745, who knew very well that they weren't ever going to see the bonnie banks of Loch Lommond again.

Phil Collins sings,

> "Take me Home, seems so long I've been reaching,
> still don't know what for...
> Take me home cause I don't remember"
> [Smit, p. 305]

Geraldine Page won an Oscar a while ago for her sensitive and strong portrayal of a woman who simply wants to go home, in A Trip to Bountiful. And, where, after all, are those wonderful Budweiser Clydesdales taking us - mesmerized by gentle snow, bells jingling, frosted window and warm fire - if it is not home for Christmas? We all are "Dreaming of a White Christmas" these days; and we'll all go home, in a sense.

The trouble is, as Thomas Wolfe advised us a generation ago, you really can't go home again and the effort to do so can be disappointing and troublesome. In a fine article in Theology Today, Laura Smit, a professional Christian educator, tells about planning her Christmas homecoming, flying across the country from the Eastern city where she lives and works to her Mid-western home with bundles of presents. And after an hour or so with her parents, she realized that home wasn't home any more because she had changed. "There was no soda water in the refrigerator, no croissants, the jam was full of sugar and the coffee was decaffeinated. My mother walked in as I was singing along to a pop song on the radio. She looked surprised. 'You used to listen to such nice music she said.'" [Laura Smit, "The Image of Home," Theology Today, October, 1988, pgs. 305-314.]

Part of the charm and knowing wisdom of Garrison Keillor was that in his "Prairie Home Companion" monologues, he combined just the right amount of nostalgia and realism about home. In his book, Leaving Home, there is a

chapter appropriately entitled Exiles, and it, too, is about people home for Christmas.

Corrine Ingquist came home to Lake Wobegon for Christmas - in her red VW from Minneapolis - with 132 critical essays by her students on Robert Frost's The Road not Taken, in the back seat.

"She pulled up the driveway and parked by the old limestone wall. She got out the shopping bag of presents and essays and walked up the three steps to the back door and put her bare hand on the cold brass knob and a sudden cold thought came to mind: **This soon shall pass**. And it won't be too long... She went in. Her parents greet her - 'Hello, dear, you look so wonderful.' The tree is in the same place, beside the old piano, in front of the bright fish tank. But it's not the same. Christmas dinner is 'frozen turkey pouches' in the microwave, but when the bell finally rings the peas are a bluish green and the turkey pouches have flecks of silvery ash in them. So instead of the traditional meal they used to eat they have to go to other relatives for dinner.

"Over at Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Mass is full of exiles, lapsed Catholics too busy or too indolent for church but who come 'for Christmas,' to hear music and see the candles and smell incense and feel hopeful.

"Dozens of exiles were back. Christmas exerts powerful forces. We turn a corner in a wretched shopping mall and some few bars of a tune turn a switch in our heads and gates open and tons of water thunder through Hoover Dam, the big turbines spin, electricity flows, and we get in our car and go back, like salmon." [Leaving Home, pgs. 179-186]

There comes a time for most of us when you can't go home because home isn't there any more. There comes a hard but important day in our lives when there is no one left and you clear out the house, sell it and drive away. There is not only no reason to come back, there literally is no more coming back; and going home takes on a whole new dimension.

What does this deep and powerful impetus mean? Is there something - anything more here than nostalgia?

Our readings this morning focused on the idea. The first, the 137th Psalm, a poem about the exiles in Babylon:

> "How shall we sing the Lord's song
> in a foreign land?
> May my tongue cleave to the roof
> of my mouth if I forget you,
> O Jerusalem."

The second was a letter, actually, written to those exiles from a man of deep spiritual insight. It is difficult to read his words without hearing the music of Handle's "Messiah." They are the opening tenor aria and chorus, from Isaiah 40:

"Comfort ye, comfort ye my people
Saith your God.
Make straight in the desert a highway for our God
and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed."

It's wonderful Christmas music. It's homecoming music.

In 587 B.C., Jerusalem was leveled by the victorious armies of Babylon and the upper echelon of Jewish culture was simply removed, carried off into captivity. There, in Babylon, the exiles lived for a generation. Children were born and raised and became adults who had never seen Jerusalem. The people were cut off, separated from everything that gave them identity, lost, living in a wilderness of despair and memory and homesickness. And to them came the letter, written by a prophet who was back in Jerusalem:

"Comfort, comfort -
Your warfare is ended -
Make a highway in the desert for your God..."

You're going home. It's a great moment in the formation of our religious tradition. In fact, the exiles did return. More important however is the idea of a God of the lost - a God who hears the cries of his people. A God who intercedes in human history and saves the people.

God knowing about lostness and bringing people home is an important Biblical idea, and it is a consistent idea in our literature. In Anne Tyler's fine new novel, Breathing Lessons, Maggie, the heroine, loves her family and the sense of home so much that she will do anything, however foolish and unrealistic to preserve it. And one of the most powerful pieces of writing in all of literature is the introduction to Thomas Wolfe's Look Homeward Angel:

"Naked and alone we came into exile.
In her dark womb we did not know our
mother's face, and from the prison of
her flesh have we come into the unspeakable
and uncommunicable prison of earth.
Which of us is not forever
a stranger and alone?... Lost!"

The fact that homelessness, lostness, is so deeply a part of human experience, suggests that deep within us we know there is a home somewhere. All those songs and poems about going home suggest that part of our humanity is a sense that the place we are in is not the right place: that in the wilderness of our lives there is a place of safety and beauty. Our sense of lostness suggests that deep within each of us is an urging to be at home. Even when we do not have a home to return to for Christmas: even when going home is not possible, we know, deeply and profoundly that there is a place where we can be whole and well. "You have made our hearts restless, until they find their rest in thee," St. Augustine confessed. It is one of the most provocative suggestions anyone ever made. Our

spiritual restlessness is put in us by God. Our spiritual homesickness is part of God's legacy. The impetus to faith and trust are God's gifts to us.

Significantly, one of Jesus' most important stories was about a homecoming: a young man who was lost and "came to himself" when he remembered his father's love; and who turned around and came home.

C. S. Lewis observed that there is in each of us "the desire for our proper place" and that we carry with us a "sense of exile, a stabbing hunger for the beauty we seem to have mislaid." [See Laura Smit, p. 312]

Tilden Edwards, who writes beautifully about matters of the heart, observes that "we often find ourselves living in exile from God."

Why should that be? Why should we, of all people, be lost? I suppose there are reasons as varied as there are people in this sanctuary. And among them must be - that we simply haven't had time for our relationship with God. Like an estranged son or daughter, who doesn't write or call, we are preoccupied with living. It's not that we have anything against God. It's nothing that profound. It's just that we haven't gotten around to it.

And surely among the reasons for our exile is that we have done something which we conclude has rendered us unacceptable to God; and we live in a wasteland of unresolved guilt, regret and remorse.

Others of us are in exile from God because the intellectual challenge of thinking about God and God's relationship to this complex world has simply been overwhelming. We haven't engaged in it for years and our exile is a matter of polite and mutual no-fault separation. Still others are in an exile of unbelief. We want to believe, on occasion do believe, but mostly live in a wilderness of doubt.

It is, apparently, part of the human condition. It is part of our condition - this relentless sense of being lost. And somehow at Christmas, it comes to the surface powerfully. Out on Michigan Avenue when we hear the Salvation Army Brass playing "O Little Town of Bethlehem" our eyes tear, our throats tighten and we know that there is a home - a relationship with God - still beckoning us.

It is not nostalgia. It is the God of the lost finding us in our lostness. It is the power of an infinite grace urging us home to our own true and best self - to our roots - to a relationship with the God who created us, loves us and wants us. Home for Christmas, theologically defined, means a life-giving, life sustaining, life-challenging relationship with God.

On Thanksgiving weekend there was an item in the New York Times that caught my attention. It appeared under a picture of a Woody Woodpecker balloon in the Macy's Christmas parade. It was about a mother who was spending her time telling others about bringing her son - sick with AIDS - back into her home.

Mildred Pearson, who with her husband, has raised fourteen children in a Brooklyn Housing project, "confronted her son's debilitating illness openly and with compassion. 'There are a whole lot of mothers out there who may not want to tell this story, but I loved Bruce.... He was a wonderful son. My son was gay. I didn't like that, but he was... These children who are dying, these are the same children who loved us. How can we leave them forgotten, abandoned?'"

And then she tells the audiences who are listening to her "how she and her husband took their son from the hospital and then home to love him... How they diapered, fed, clothed, bathed him, encouraged him to speak again and walk. It was love, she said, that kept him alive for seven months after doctors had given up hope."

There is something of that in the story of a God who hears the cries of exiles and brings them home...

- a God who hears the captives and brings them comfort and hope.

- a God who hears the urgent prayers - or the long silences - of those who are lost, and insistently tugs at their hearts and minds and emotions and wills.

It is not nostalgia. The exiles in Babylon came home to a new covenant, a new way of thinking and the difficult task of building a new future.

This business is not simply a matter of returning to the past. No adult, Laura Smit noted, wants to return to mom and dad except an adult with problems.

God comes to the lost to give them bearings, direction, purpose and hope.

And there is something of all of that in this story of a man and woman going home to Bethlehem to have their baby: something of the one who comes to us to bring us home: that is, to a new and grace-filled relationship with God, and a strong and courageous life in the future. God of the lost: God who comes to each of us in our lostness.

"Comfort, comfort my people
says your God.

Make straight in the desert
a highway for our God."

All glory to you, O God, for coming into the life of the world in that man and woman and their homecoming. All glory to you, O God, for coming into our world in ways quiet but insistently full of peace and grace. All glory to you, O God, for coming to us, finding us, in Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. Amen